

AEU Federal Conference, January 2005

Theme: “Building Quality Public Education”

The role of Education International (EI) in building quality public education

Input from Thulas Nxesi, President of EI, General Secretary of SADTU (South African Democratic Teachers Union)

Introductory remarks

Leaders of the AEU, dignitaries and honoured guests, and most importantly delegates representing the teachers of Australia – allow me to greet you on behalf of Education International – which represents nearly 30 million teachers worldwide. Also allow me to convey solidarity greetings from the leadership and members of my own union – the South African Democratic Teachers Union – representing two-thirds of public school educators in that country.

I always like to start a public presentation by reciting the numbers of members we have in our unions. Partly this is done to strike fear into the hearts of any employer present in the audience ... but it also reminds us that it is these members which provide the reason for our existence and which – in their thousands – allows us as unions to speak with authority and from a position of strength. Those members are the union – without their active support and participation we are nothing.

Let me thank the AEU for their invitation and for this opportunity to share ideas and learn from your experiences and the debates which take place at this conference.

I. The role of EI: the 4th World Congress

The teachers of the world – or at least their representatives – met last year in Brazil to develop policies and strategies to take forward the cause of quality public education and the interests of the profession. Incidentally I think it is very important and a very positive sign that EI – very much

with the support of your union - should vote for a candidate from the South for the position of President.

Allow me to take this opportunity to make a few comments on the outcomes of the Congress. I believe that the following four themes emerged very powerfully:

1. The threat of HIV/Aids
2. The struggle for quality public education for all – the theme of this conference
3. The search for a new global order based on social justice, peace and security, and a commitment to defending human rights, and
4. Building teacher unity and trade union organization to improve the conditions of education workers

1. The threat of HIV/Aids

In adopting an urgent resolution on HIV/Aids, Congress was telling us that as EI we have to redouble our efforts to fight the pandemic. The data presented at the Bangkok Conference on Aids was a timely reminder that there is no room for complacency. As educators we are in the front line in fighting the pandemic. We have to provide clarity and leadership in this matter.

Let us be very clear about this. In many parts of the world, movement towards social progress and education for all – let alone quality education - is directly undermined by the threat of HIV/Aids.

EI can be very proud of its record on awareness and prevention campaigns. We now have to take this struggle to the next level. As unions we have to develop strategies and structures to provide care and support to sick colleagues and to our learners. We have to campaign for appropriate medical treatment, and to defend the rights of colleagues and learners living with HIV/Aids. We have to stand up in our communities and speak out against prejudice and stigma.

2. The struggle for quality public education for all

We are workers and trade unionists, but we are also passionate about the education of our children and our people. The theme of this World

Congress – “Education for global progress” - aptly captured this commitment. I will speak at greater length on this area later in my input.

3. *The search for a new global order based on social justice, peace and security, and a commitment to defending human rights*

I believe, as EI, we are part of a global awakening of progressive forces for social change and justice. We can take hope from the resilience of the international labour movement which refuses to lie down in the face of corporate globalization. We take hope from the emergence of new social movements on the ground representing the dispossessed and oppressed.

In some instances, we can also celebrate the democratic election of governments committed to social justice – such as my own government in South Africa – which is committed to the eradication of poverty. We should not be afraid to support such governments – whilst remaining vigilant in the defense of our members’ interests – always our first duty as unions.

The World Congress tackled a number of related themes all of which point to the beginnings of a search for a new and more just world order:

- Issues of world peace and security were to the fore. Debate was at times robust – regarding tactics and wording of resolutions – and the house was split on a number of issues. But there was no doubt that the vast majority of delegates were talking the same language:
 - There was a common concern and understanding that unilateral military action is unacceptable and that we have to seek alternatives rooted in strong multi-lateral institutions, in respect for international law and in a commitment to negotiated settlements to conflicts.
 - There is a shared revulsion against terrorism in all its guises – whether state terrorism or that carried out by irregular forces, and a commitment to understanding and rooting out the underlying causes of terrorism.
- As EI we spoke out on human rights abuses – including political and labour rights, women’s rights and the rights of children. The

resolution on Gender and HIV/Aids points to a deeper understanding of how unequal gender relations is fuelling the pandemic. Trade unionists who are persecuted, learners that are abused, women educators who face gender oppression, and those who suffer discrimination of any kind – deserve our urgent attention and solidarity.

Let me just say that as South Africans we benefited greatly from international solidarity in the struggle against Apartheid. My own experience was in helping to build the first national democratic non-racial teachers union – SADTU – in the 1980s and 1990s. In the early years we depended on financial support from the international trade union movement to keep the fledgling union going. As a result we were able to grow to be one of the strongest unions in South Africa today.

- The Congress was reminded that poverty and inequality lie at the root of – or exacerbate the problems that face us in rolling out EFA and in combating the HIV/Aids pandemic. We are still struggling to develop alternative economic strategies to address this; but certainly it would have to include debt relief to developing nations, a much fairer trade regime, and development cooperation programmes geared to the real needs of the people.
- Finally, any new world order would have to be built on an ethical basis of democracy and respect for individual human rights. As EI, in adopting a position of opposition to the death penalty we made a powerful contribution to such a vision.

4. Building teacher unity and trade union organization to improve the conditions of education workers

The 4th World Congress voted overwhelmingly to support an agreement to join forces with our colleagues in the World Confederation of Teachers (WCT) – important business on the road to our goal of teacher unity. The direct result of that agreement – and the admission to EI of our colleagues from the European affiliates of WCT – is that EI took a historic leap in membership from 27 million to 29 million. A note of caution. Unity at the level of the global union is not enough. In the longer term, we need to see this replicated in the regions and in each country – with our members undertaking joint campaigns to achieve the goals we have set for ourselves.

As Congress interrogated the education policy issues, we never lost sight of the simple fact that we represent education workers. There will be no quality education unless the basic conditions of educators and education workers are addressed. Congress passed resolutions and put in place mechanisms to promote collective bargaining and to promote the status of education personnel. We must never lose sight of this basic role that we have as trade unions – this keeps us focused.

II. Building Quality Public Education

You have chosen a massive theme for your conference. How do we get a handle on this? One possibility is to engage in a debate about quality. What do we mean by quality? Any answer to this question would need to be informed by an appreciation of the aims and objectives of our different education systems. What are the appropriate contents and methodologies which would allow us to lay claim to the notion of quality education? Does quality imply relevance to a broader set of societal and labour market demands – or are we defending a set of intrinsic educational goods and values against the changing whims of a globalised economy?

As practicing teachers and unionists we have a tendency to shy away from such fundamental debates - to leave these matters to the philosophers of education – so that we can concentrate on more concrete issues of delivery. But these are important debates – which we ignore at our peril.

Another more technicist approach to our theme would be to list the things we need to have in place in order to deliver an accepted notion of quality education – educational factors of production if you like. These would – at a minimum – have to include the following:

- Well-trained, adequately remunerated and highly motivated educators. You will remember that for World Teachers' Day last year this was an issue prioritized by EI under the theme: "Quality teachers for quality education". Without repeating all the arguments we made at that time this must remain key. At the heart of quality education lies quality teachers.
- Adequate educational infrastructure – eg. buildings and facilities, computers, learning materials etc.

- A conducive environment for learning and teaching to take place – at the least peace and security; but also political commitment to the goals of quality education and civil society capacity to monitor and enforce such goals.

None of these factors can be taken for granted across large parts of the world today. In the poorest countries of the world teachers simply don't get paid for months on end. With the blessing of some international agencies there is a push to employ more unqualified teachers to cheapen education systems. In my own country it will shock you to know that after a decade of democracy – the educational backlogs and inequalities were such that still some 70% of schools do not have a library. Many do not have electricity or water. You are all aware that in many parts of the world conflict and insecurity make it impossible for normal schooling to proceed – let alone quality education.

And that is the point I want to make: building quality public education is not simply a technical process – it is an intensely political process in which we find ourselves in the midst of an ideological and philosophical minefield. And this may be EI's most important role: to give leadership and coherence to the global processes of advocacy, lobbying and campaigning needed to build, maintain and defend quality public education.

Delegates will be aware of the global onslaught over the last few decades against the public provision of education – inspired by neo-liberal macro-economic policies and often led by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. In recent years the pronouncements of such institutions have become more muted in the face of mounting evidence that such policies do not work.

EI has made the argument for public education as a public good. We have highlighted the dangers of privatisation which would benefit only the rich and leave our societies more divided than ever. We have made the argument that education and training is an investment for the future – and not simply a drain on the fiscus. At an intellectual level we have won the argument for quality public education for all. But this is not enough.

We still need to be on our guard. The World Bank World Development Report released a year ago – under the guise of promoting decentralization and parental choice – remains fundamentally antagonistic to public education in general and teachers in particular.

Also, it is not enough simply to win the philosophical argument in favour of public education. We have to campaign and lobby for adequate budgets to sustain quality public education. On a global level we have to mobilise behind the objectives set in Dakar for Education for All. Experience shows that as teacher unions we will need to lead – but on our own we will not win this struggle. We are going to need allies in civil society: our learners and students, their parents, the school governing bodies, the communities that surround our schools, the broader labour and progressive movement. We have to go out and explain the issues to these constituencies, listen to people’s concerns and build a mighty movement for quality public education.

Let me bring in a little of my own experience here – the internal mass democratic movement within South Africa which undermined Apartheid rule in the 1980s had a major foothold in the education system. It was based exactly on such an alliance of the trade unions, the student movement and community organizations. We need to adapt that strategic vision if we are to translate the objectives of EFA into reality and to build and defend quality public education.

Concluding remarks

My input then boils down to some simple observations and suggestions. In seeking to build quality public education for all we need to undertake the following:

- To engage amongst ourselves and with others in a debate about the nature of the quality education we seek to deliver;
- To research and quantify exactly what minimum factors and conditions are required to enable us to deliver this quality public education. This is important so as to clarify the kind of demands we need to put to those in government;
- To be willing to advocate and defend the case for public education in the face of the continuing neo-liberal onslaught, and
- To build the necessary networks and alliances committed to pursuing the goals of quality public education.

I believe that EI has a role to play in providing coherence and leadership to this struggle. But of course EI is simply the sum of its affiliates – and

this is where the major responsibility will lie for taking forward the struggle on the ground to build quality public education for all.

Once again thank you for allowing me to share some ideas. I look forward to learning more from your deliberations.

I thank you.